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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a disruptive model of interpretation which explores positions in discursive practices embedded in visual culture as a means of understanding self and difference. The model understands interpretation as a Foucauldian technique of the self, and its use may give art teachers and students strategies for understanding the social construction of interpretation, self, and difference through discursive positions. The model developed from a deconstruction of the responses from Grade 11 visual arts classes in two high schools in New South Wales, Australia, and emerged from text deconstruction as a tying together of modernist practices of interpretation with a postmodern understanding of the construction of interpretation and/with self. The basis for this disruptive model is found in the dilemma of authoritative (modern) interpretation and multiple voices (postmodern) interpretation. The first part of the model establishes an authoritative interpretation from sources such as artists, critics, historians, and teachers, and an examination of the discursive practices of the interpretation forms the next part of the model. (BT)

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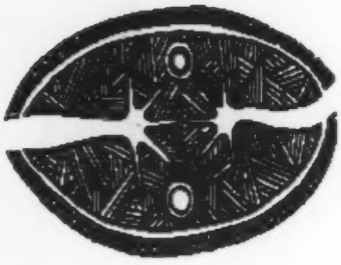

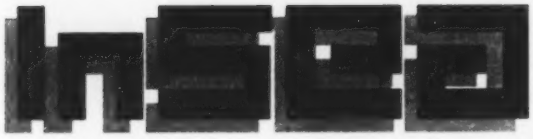

"Conversations About Art: A Disruptive Model of Interpretation"

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CONVERSATIONS ABOUT ART: A DISRUPTIVE MODEL OF INTERPRETATION.

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Conversations about Art

This paper describes a disruptive model of interpretation, which explores positions in discursive practices[1] embedded in visual culture as a means of understanding self and difference. The model understands interpretation as a Foucauldian (Martin, Gutman and Hutton, 1988) technique of the self and its use may give art teachers and students strategies for understanding the social construction of interpretation, self, and difference through discursive positions. In understanding this construction, students may be able to disrupt or resist 'where they are coming from'--their assumed discursive positions and interpretations--to explore self and difference to others. I prefer to use the term 'visual culture', acknowledging the inclusive and boundary crossing aspects of postmodernism where the traditional high art canon of museums--painting and sculpture--is de-fused. The 'new canon', if one still wants to name this reconfigured body of knowledge, becomes 're-fused' with the inclusion of all visual cultural images, that is, the visual arts and crafts including new technology, performance and installation, the popular mass media of television, film, advertising, music and architecture.

To understand the terms 'disruptive' and 'disruption' in the sphere of postmodern, poststructuralist theory is to understand it as a significant critical dismantling of the concept of structures coming out of the writings of early 20th century theorists particularly Husserl and Heidegger. Critical dismantling of structures evolves out of concern with the analytic methodology associated with structures and with the general rules by which structures work. Structuralism is intimately concerned with the cultural phenomena of modernism under whose umbrella it sits and from where it assumes that the same underlying structures determine the language of social and cultural practices. The language of clothes or myths or the practices of education can be analyzed for meaning in terms of their structures only. Structuralist ways of thought have dominated educational practices and structuralist arguments in education have made knowledge claims that have remained unquestioned and uncriticized.

Educational structuralism promotes order, organization and rationality but it ignores the role of the student and the teacher. In art education, criticism has developed from modernist models of the formal analysis of elements for meaning within the art work, to a postmodern interrogation of visual cultural texts for their multiple meanings. However these models of criticism remain centered by 'the aesthetic experience'. Disrupting the concept of 'the aesthetic experience' may be a way of finding marginalized knowledge or practices in art criticism, or may allow the viewer to have a more complex relationship with the art work as an object in the world.

Structuralist models of interpretation cannot continue the critical consciousness--reflexivity--necessary for students to come to an understanding of self without adding strategies which open up the dialogue to include the viewer's standpoint and the social and historical construction involved in that standpoint. My concept of poststructuralist interpretation is not 'tied' to rationality and is instead 'tied' to discourses, which are seen as partial and interested and 'irrational' in relation to knowledge. Poststructuralist educational practices overlap in critical or liberatory or oppositional pedagogies. Critical or liberatory practices of education do value the experience of self and of others as important sources of knowledge and educators such as Giroux and McLaren (1988) are concerned with the oppressive dimensions of schooling, classroom resistance and student struggle. I share the concern for empowerment in the classroom with giving the student the skills and strategies to see themselves as different and valuable people in a society. To see difference as valuable and important is empowering. Issues of race, gender, class, ethnicity lose their significance as conflict issues when decentered, when the emphasis is on valuing difference and the discursive practices which constitute difference.

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[1] Using Foucault, I defined discourse as a way of constituting areas of knowledge about some thing via a system of discursive practices. Discursive practices "systematically form the object of which they speak" (Foucault, 1972, p. 49).

If we think that bringing students to understand that their own constructed interpretations of meanings in visual culture is valuable, we begin to 'think' a pedagogy more sympathetic to the arts, that is "attentive to the histories, dreams and experiences which . . . students bring to school" (Giroux in Ellsworth, E., 1989, p.306). It is only by beginning with these subjective forms (as opposed to structuralist objective forms) that art educators can develop practices and strategies, which can involve students in understanding and valuing difference in self and others. Ellsworth (1989) notes the "possibility that each student will be capable of identifying a multiplicity of authentic voices in her/himself" (p.312). Understanding that they speak from various positions, either dominantly or marginally, in discursive practices, leads students to understand an important concept; that they cannot 'speak' for others but can understand where different and particular interpretations of meanings of others may come from.

The Disruptive Model in an Educational Setting

In order to understand its context and before describing the model I will look briefly at the educational setting in which this will be used. The educational narratives through which schools are read are generally ones of rationality, excellence, achievement, order, accountability and equity (Giroux, 1989). What schools teach is interest related and ideologically framed. In schools teachers and students are decentered in two ways. The structuralist nature of the school revolves around relationships within the structure; and what has been authorized to be taught centers on relationships of content and practices. To bring the student back into the 'center' of meaning, one poststructuralist approach may be to investigate the ways that modernist structuralist practices can be disrupted or deconstructed by 'close reading'. Modernist practices involving any authoritative or dominant interpretation of visual culture may be subjected to a close or disruptive reading. This is not to displace or remove the authoritative interpretation, but to allow students to position themselves in the discursive practices of that interpretation and to see how that particular position may construct a reinterpretation. The disruptive model probes a student's ability to understand positioning in the world. Knowing their own histories as constructed may allow movement towards some kind of agency or self-empowerment in their interpretations of the world.

The model developed from a deconstruction of the responses from two Year (Grade) 11 Visual Arts classes in two high schools in New South Wales, Australia, with whom I conducted six critical conversations. I based these conversations round *Atomic Love* (1990), a contemporary installation by the American artist, Sandy Skoglund, which exists now only as photographs. The conversations were sequenced to allow students to discuss and question a broad understanding of familiar and unfamiliar concepts of interpretation, discourses/discursive practices and positioning.

The model emerged from text deconstruction as a tying together of modernist practices of interpretation with a postmodern understanding of the construction of interpretation and/with self. The basis for this disruptive model was not to be found, as I had believed, in a choice between modernist and postmodernist practices but in an acknowledgment of a different working arrangement of modernist and postmodernist narratives within a postmodern framework. The model therefore hinged on what I perceived to be reluctance by students to relinquish any authoritative interpretation while still maintaining a postmodern concept of multiple interpretations when critically looking at visual culture.

The Disruptive Model

This reluctance to relinquish a modernist position in relation to an authoritative interpretation while still adhering to a general belief about postmodern multiple voices in making interpretations had to taken into account. The disruptive model begins by identifying the authoritative interpretation of the selected visual image as a set of discursive practices, moving towards an examination of those practices where the image is temporarily 'left behind'. Students explore their own positions in the discursive practices and how those positions may construct interpretation. Finally, in a return to the art work through discussion and 'writing', a reinterpretation occurs through an understanding of positioning and its role in the constitution of interpretation. Certain understanding about the constructedness of self emerge from these areas.

The first part of the model establishes an authoritative interpretation from sources such as artists, critics, historians and teachers. From what sources to draw such an interpretation may depend on what is available to the class and teacher. Investigation of contemporary art and cultural journals, art books, historical texts, autobiographies and statements, teacher's notes and class discussion are sources for an authoritative interpretation of an art image. In the case study I used five pieces of writing--two pieces of critical writing from contemporary art journals, the artist's statements from an interview with two art educators, an art educator's writing and my own reflective journal--to determine an authoritative interpretation of the Skoglund image. Some of these resources may not be available but the teacher's interpretation or an interpretation decided by class consensus, is always accessible. In the class, the authoritative interpretation may be introduced early in the conversation, centered round the image being used with this model. Through reading and discussion a discourse embedded in the interpretation is unpacked and its discursive practices examined. With the Skoglund image, the authoritative interpretation centered round the discursive practices of alienation.

An examination of the discursive practices of the interpretation forms the next part of the model. Conversation recognizing and describing discursive practices, recalling personal experiences, playing with the practices via words and image and looking at social and historical articulation of these practices, plays an necessary and important role. These discursive practices can be described in many of their manifestations and students can describe their own relationship with them. Questions to be asked involve what these

practices look like, how they are recognized and what is their relationship with language, the artist and the artworld.

It is here that strategies of play with language become very important. The teacher and students may develop word play strategies to dismantle metaphors in order to 'misunderstand' or misread, to make chance connections between words or sounds or to examine the physicality and context of the image. Such playing with language, similar to the concept of bricolage, may involve noting the many meanings of words or unraveling words such as 'alienation' in the Skoglund image for the intertext situated in them. For instance, 'alienation' contains 'alien', a word loaded with dense science fiction connotations as well as images of frightened Mexicans caught at Mexico's border with the United States which can be pursued for further connotations. The network of discursive practices of the interpretation are themselves part of a larger network. For instance, the image's discursive practices of installation and photography must also come into play and become enmeshed in the interpretation's discursive practices.

What is intended in the model is that students develop a rich understanding of the practices of this discourse within the limits of their experiences. Where the students position themselves within the discourse, how they engage in these discursive practices either dominantly or marginally and whether there is positional shifting, are areas for discussion. Students can reflect on how other discourses involving gender or ethnicity or age construct particular positioning. Through self-reflexive discussion students begin to glimpse the constructedness of the world and themselves. This is where the model leaves the image and concentrates on the student and their experiences of this discourse. Students can be encouraged at this point to think about change and the possibility of choice in positioning because of an understanding, albeit immature, of how interpretations are constituted by one's particular positioning in all discourses.

The conversation at this point is crucial. The teacher should be flexible and adaptable, listening carefully and working intuitively in order to use important phrases and statements made by students. Here contradictions and ambiguities in the conversation should be remembered and recorded. What ensues depends on what streams in the conversation are followed and the teacher must be able to act on or redirect the flows and eddies of the conversation. Nothing that students say in this conversation is irrelevant; everything can be traced and retraced in this discussion of discursive practices. Students explain, through personal experiences and relationships with discursive practices, how they are positioned in the world. All these experiences will be different but they may share similar understandings of these experiences.

The students and teacher have now built up an intimate and complex description and understanding of the discursive practices of the interpretation. They have seen differences, and some similarities, of experiences of other students and will have some understanding that these have been constituted by discourses particularly those in which they are dominantly positioned. Describing discourses as overlapping web-like networks of practices allows students to see how their own positions are constantly shifting within those networks.

In having an intimate understanding of these discursive practices, students can work 'across known ground' to become more disruptive, interrogative, thus beginning to work against these practices. Critical questions revolve around who makes decisions about these practices or who allows what can be said or done in these practices. Further disruption of the dominant discursive practices by looking at marginal or oppositional practices, or looking for ambiguities or contradictions within the practices, can begin to undermine the base which legitimizes the differences in these practices. For example, in discussing the Skoglund image, the students understood the practices of 'love' as not necessarily opposed to the dominant practices of 'alienation'. Contradictions arose in the conversation about "different love". The students were already beginning to undermine the relationships in these practices by revealing the constructedness of oppositions.

Why is it necessary for this model to be disruptive? The discursive practices of the interpretation need to be shown as problematic in order to provide more space for an exploration of potential for change. By disrupting the dominant practices of the discourse of the interpretation, a space is formed in which other things can exist, particularly the way we may rethink our own positioning and the way we use language in discursive practices. Rethinking our particular positioning--that one may be able to adopt different positions--allows students to explore notions of multiple or different selves and the implications for interpretation. This is where the model can return to the image.

The questions raised in disrupting the dominant practices of the interpretation can now be addressed to the image, which may be made to give up other meanings in response. Do the dominant practices of the interpretation remain dominant when the students return to the image? Do students still concur with the authoritative interpretation? Is there somewhere within the image that subverts the dominant interpretation? Does being part of more than one discourse bring the image back into the social world? Has one's positioning changed in relation to the discursive practices of the interpretation or to the image? Other important questions here for students and teachers concern how they see the constructedness of interpretation in relation to their own positions within the discourse. Students can be asked how a more thorough understanding of the discursive practices of the interpretation enables them to continue or change their positions within those practices. Has the understanding of discursive practices and positioning changed the way one thinks of different interpretations? These questions are meant to be reflective and may provide no definitive answers-only more questions.

"Basically all I did was make notes on it...tear it down the middle...separated. I was going to use scissors but I thought that would be too definite while the separation was ambiguous." A student's description of his visual verbal[2]. The visual verbal is a means of 'writing and imaging' about interpretation that many art teachers have used over a number of years and has a history in visual arts education in N.S.W., Australia. By using the visual verbal concept the model can continue to explore the students' positions in the discourse of the interpretation. Various ways by which art teachers and students approach the visual verbal depend on the image being discussed. Sometimes students may appropriate one art work and collage the images into another art work. Sometimes new words and images are used over the art work. The exploration of collage and montage is important here. The student develops the visual verbal from classroom discussion. It is the appropriative quality, the palimpsestuous[3] nature of the visual verbal which particularly characterizes it as postmodern.

The model can be developed as a palimpsest, a collage/montage of words and images. The creating of another text from the image under critical discussion is a way whereby students can reexamine their positions in the discursive practices of the interpretation. The physical and intellectual distancing of the palimpsest allows a non-threatening space to be opened for exploration of positioning. The visual verbal serves either to reinforce one's perceived position in the discursive practices of the image, or enables a choice about a different position. Disruptive interrogation of an art work through one's own art work at this distance can produce interpretations not able to be expressed verbally. I found that art students, involved in a series of lessons in 1994 in an Ohio, U.S.A. high school, had difficulties with the psychological aspects of the particular Skoglund work (*Revenge of the Goldfish*, 1981) being discussed in class. They began to resolve these difficulties in the visual verbals or palimpsests, created from their interpretations of this image. My use of visual verbals with American and Australian students and Skoglund texts showed that this is what happened (Gooding-Brown, 1994). The Australian students generally confirmed their positions in the discourse of the interpretation by emphasizing 'alienation' with image and word. The American students used the visual verbal to position themselves differently in the discursive practices of their interpretation because the conversation in class had not encouraged them to declare anything but marginal positions. As I see the disruptive model incorporating the visual verbal as a postmodern 'writing' genre in which to further explore positioning in discursive practices, it is important to exploit the possibilities of word and image manipulation. Students need to see that imaging/writing about art works can be a number of different writing and art genres moving between image and word. They need to understand that this writing genre is fluid and flexible--not bound by anachronistic limitations--in order to explore and expand polysemic interpretations of words, images and spaces. Artists and writers such as Lewis Carroll, Picasso and Cubist collage; the work of Schwitters, Hausmann, Heartfield and Stuart Davis; James Joyce; Gertrude Stein in collaboration with Juan Gris; Fluxus artists and the art works of Tom Phillips can form the basis for an examination of the play of word and image.

The teaching strategies which prompted students towards thinking both self reflectively and self reflexively were ones which provoked the students to doubt their knowledge and thinking on issues of interpretation and discourses. Students were stimulated into areas of speculative thinking, 'risk taking' or forced to defend their current beliefs which in turn opened more areas for discussion. I adopted particular types of questioning and attitudes or played about with language, causing students to think disruptively about the art work and the issues discussed. Teaching strategies which encourage students to doubt or support their own or other's thinking are necessary for this to occur.

I believe this critical activity, by exposing interpretation as discursive practice, allows a number of things. Firstly, by using an authoritative interpretation of the image to understand practices of the world student work from a known and accepted premise. However the model encourages disruption of this authoritative interpretation. Secondly, by understanding interpretations as discursive practices, the viewer can be positioned in the practices of the interpretation. This allows the viewer to move into the image itself in order to disrupt the dominant discursive practices in a way that may force the text to acknowledge its own constructedness in all discourses. This interaction establishes both the viewer and the image as particular products of social construction and thus reconnects the viewer and the image in the world. Thirdly, by moving into the image to locate themselves in the world, viewers have to become both self reflective and self reflexive. While I acknowledge that this may not lead students in the classroom to an understanding of self-construction, it nevertheless sets them in a space where they can begin to inquire about discursive positions in relation to self and others. This model does not give answers, but instead opens up areas of thinking for students where one might understand the significance of self and difference as constituted or constructed by discourses. In beginning to understand this social construction, students as viewers can also begin to make active choices about positioning and interpretation in relation to visual culture.

Implications for a Postmodern Art Education

The reconnection between art as social construct and the world, the understanding of discursive positioning and links with interpretation and the beginnings of an understanding of self and choices about one's positioning in the world, are all major postmodern issues in this project for a new interpretive model.

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[2] The term 'visual verbal' was used in support documents associated with the State mandated Visual Arts Syllabus, Board of Studies, New South Wales, Australia.

[3] 'palimpsestuous' from palimpsest, the concept of reading one text through another, one text doubling for another or extracting a new text from an old one In this case the text was an art image.

They have implications and consequences for a different art criticism in the field of art education. Current art criticism in the school system still tends to separate the art work from the social world in a modernist manner. Such practices are still taught with particular overtones, the generic questions, 'what do you see?' and 'how does it make you feel?' are not directed at the individual but the group, giving the 'you' a kind of universality. In noting questions for teacher's use for art criticism classes in a museum setting, "What general feelings do you derive from the work?" seems most commonly asked (Teacher Resource Guide, MOCA, San Diego, 1996). I believe this type of universality maintains a modernist separation of art and the life world, where the art 'work', replete with meaning, is positioned in an seemingly inaccessible place stripped of its cultural framework, divorced from the conditions of its production (Readings & Schaber, 1993).

In rethinking the world as postmodern, visual culture becomes text to be read and positioned as discursive practices of a 'modernist' popular culture, now included as the dominant practices of the culture of the postmodern. The image can no longer be separated from the network of discursive practices that frame it as a social product. For the viewer to be involved with the image means a recognition of, and engagement with, those discursive practices. What this means is that images in visual culture can be reconnected, through the recognition and exploration of discursive practices, with the viewer and the world. Thus the viewer makes the link by recognizing themselves in the world as part of the discursive practices constructing the image. Images in visual culture begin to become indistinguishable from the world, not a framed reflection of it. This disruptive model therefore takes a new approach to the viewer's relationship to the image, not only as spectator, but also as participant in the work. The space between the image and the viewer is crossed and the viewer engages with the work. The viewer as constitutive of discursive practices connects with the art work, which is also constitutive of all discursive practices. Even the concept of temporality loses its relevance here. It is not important that the art work is historically past, or that the space crossed between the art work reconnects past with present. What is important is that the viewer engages with the art work in such a way that awareness of one's own and other's positioning in the discursive practices of the text occurs in order to understand self and difference from self.

Students in current structures of educational practices rarely find themselves with access to knowledge or methods which they will need to participate in a critical exploration of themselves and of the world in which they exist. Current educational narratives are still framed by the belief in the self as autonomous and rational being. Postmodernism's particular engagement with such modernist narratives provides a basis for interrogation, giving opportunities to rethink these narratives. Therefore this model, by engaging with a modernist narrative of authoritative privilege, allows one to read against it by disrupting it. At the same time modernist assumptions of an individual's capacity for critical and reflective thinking are not abandoned but combined with a postmodern reflexivity and exploration of self and difference through discursive practices. Thus the model moves between and about modernist and postmodernist theoretical positions. At the same time, because of this understanding, students can also choose different positioning within discourses in order to change or rethink their interpretations. Critically and reflexively thinking about choice also may help students to think about the space from which they are thinking, the context in which they are interpreting. The notion of critically or reflexively thinking about choice or agency in making particular decisions about interpretations has important implications and consequences for art education and education in general.

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